

Cotham 27th August, 2017

Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug – words from our first reading.

In the name...

Isaiah was speaking to a people waiting in exile. God's salvation will come soon. Jerusalem will again be a garden, where joy and happiness abound, where songs of thanksgiving will again be sung. What has been missing will be restored. What has been lost will be found. God is attentive to what we need to achieve fullness of life. God will act accordingly and swiftly. v. 5 The time of waiting is nearly over.

In just over a week's time we shall start a period of waiting. For a new vicar.

Maybe Isaiah's words are for us too. Look to the rock from which you were hewn. One rock was St. Mary's Tyndalls Park with its anglo-catholic tradition, of transcendent worship and symbolism. And St Saviour, Woolcot Park with its liberal tradition. With evangelicalism currently in the ascendant in the Church of England there is a great need for the liberal catholic stream.

Look to the rock from which you were hewn . The Hebrews learned to associate the idea of "rock" with that of security and unchangeableness. Yet the rock Isaiah was thinking of was primarily Abraham - anything but unchangeable. It was Abraham who moved off into the unknown at the call of God, who left what was safe and comfortable for a land whose name he did not even know. It was Abraham who had the courage to argue with God, who made powerful, daring intercession for the sake of the city of Sodom. It was father Abraham who was willing to risk his only son and his own future for the sake of obedience to God. Remember him and all like him in the past of this church.

Remember Sarah our mother in faith. It was Sarah in her old age who laughed in scorn at God's promise. But she was transformed. She birthed a son in her old age, created a future, and served God's impossibility in the world.

We stand on the shoulders of mothers and fathers who have been obedient to the gospel in ways that matter. So remember these great saints in this church, but also remember those around the edges of this church, all of whom belong to this family of risk and obedience, who I like to imagine are in the woodwork around us today.

Today's reading from Romans has advice for us too. Be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God. Paul challenges the assumption that our understanding of truth is limited by our own perspective and experience. As part of God's new creation, we are called to acknowledge our continual need for renewed perception by God's Spirit, which results in a clearer understanding of God's will for the church

Renewed perception - not nostalgic and romantic for the good old days, not seeking a new vicar who is like Fr. Nev or Paul Roberts or Richard Holroyd.

What happened to the dinosaur? What destroyed him? Nothing! The climate around him changed. He didn't. He died!"

There is a danger that we become excessively nostalgic when usually, by the good old days, we mean only about thirty years ago. The United Church of Christ in New York City was nearly defunct. Every year at strawberry time, the church had a strawberry festival. In previous years they used to fill the church basement with excitement, delight, and many people. Now only about twenty-four people came; all the others were gone. But in an act of nostalgia, they continued the pretence and set up tables for two hundred people, with many uneaten strawberries. Isaiah wrote about people so excessively in love with those wonderful past times that they have completely misunderstood the present tense.

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Some congregations expect a new pastor to function exactly like the old pastor. "You can't do that, because so and so did it this way!" It sets back the ministry of a church for several years

In our Gospel, Jesus promises that the gates of Hell will not prevail against his church. It survived Nero's persecution in 64 CE but what about the strong churches in North Africa or many in Asia Minor after the Muslim arrival of the 7th century? Perhaps even before that event they were weakened by divisions.

The mission of this church is not finished. The work of this church is not a holding action. The future of this church is not business as usual.

And while we wait, Paul has more advice for us while we are without a priest. Paul had been a Pharisee. Pharisees were laymen. Whereas the Sadducees emphasized the priesthood, the sacrificial cult as the only redemptive activity in Jewish life, the Pharisees felt that people should please God in virtually every action of everyday life. So often maligned in the Gospels, the Pharisees wanted to transfer religion from the Temple to the home giving, in effect, every person the opportunity to serve as a priest of God.

Also, against the arrogant and haughty attitude of the Sadducees, the Pharisees offered a populist and progressive attitude toward observance of the Law. Whereas the Sadducees considered the written texts of the Hebrew Scriptures a closed book, the Pharisees continued to debate and interpret the application of Scripture to everyday life. From the moment he got up to the time he went to sleep, the Pharisee sought solutions for situations that the Mosaic Laws had never anticipated: the foreign occupation of Palestine's land, the need to pay taxes to a pagan power, the necessity of dealing with Gentiles on a daily basis. They led the ongoing debate to apply the principles of the Law to changing circumstance. The Pharisees embraced the Hellenistic idea of life after death which Jesus followed. They were a minority

position in their church but, because of their support among the urban elites of the country, their influence was still strong.

Paul urges us to offer ourselves as 'living sacrifices'. Not dead animals sacrificed in the temple; not just keeping the show running here but living sacrificial lives in the world; offering our unique gifts in the service of others.

The first spiritual gift he mentions is prophecy. Prophecy is the uttering of God's will under the impulse of the Holy Spirit: a gift of speech where the Holy Spirit communicates God's will for His people.

Rather than blessing each community with a few people who could do it all, God bestows each individual with specific gifts. Collectively, these gifts are necessary for the Church to survive and prosper. Spiritual gift diversity is a prerequisite for the congregation's unity and spiritual prosperity.

The key is for each Christian is to discover their particular gift and to develop it through the grace of the Holy Spirit. So, listen carefully and try to discover: What is your spiritual gift? How is God calling you to serve? How are you going to use that gift for the benefit of the spiritual community?

Finally, in our gospel, Jesus presents Peter with the keys to the kingdom. Keys can be used to either release or to lock something away: to protect or to confine. Who controls them? What is our responsibility as the key holders? Jesus's words to Peter are a very personal challenge; one Jesus gives to all of us: 'YOU have the keys. Now unlock the door and let me in!'